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Role of Flashbacks in Relationship

Depiction in *This is Us*

In Partial Fulfillment of Graduation Requirements

University of Portland

Department of Communication Studies

Submitted by

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Television messages have been a reflection and portrayal of society and relationship dynamics since televisions became a staple for the average American household in the 1950s. Depictions of family dynamics on television started out as black and white network series broadcasted from sets in front of a live audience. They have grown to become more sophisticated and creative with a greater array of narrative, technical, and production tools. Television producers and writers are able to explore new and unique ways of conveying messages to their audience through the use of techniques such as flashbacks. While the use of flashbacks is not new and is a common technique that has been used in many popular television shows such as *Golden Girls*, *Friends*, *LOST*, and *Orange is the New Black*, the new 2017 series, *This is Us*, has utilized this technique to show how relationships progress and are connected through time and as a way to captivate the audience. Flashbacks give the audience a look into a character's history that would otherwise be left out of the narrative.

Justification for Study

Television dramas have become complex and rich with multiple characters and storylines. Many recent television shows focus on depicting families and the intricacies of their relationships including *Modern Family*, *Parenthood*, *Friday Night Lights*, and now *This is Us*. According to Signorielli, marriage and family have always been important themes in television message research (585). These themes can be easily related to and stretched to include various topics such as diversity, race, and non-traditional families. Starting in the 1980s, television shows started to depict black characters as central to the storylines and as successful, competent, professional, and attractive as the white characters (Payne 232). Television shows also began portraying more minority and diverse families, as well as putting children in the forefront of the family (Douglas and Olson 73, 92). In these family depictions, the characters and their

relationships become so important to the audience that the character's role continues beyond the narrative (Porter, et al. 24). Characters are seen not just as fictional, but as real people (Porter, et al. 24). Actors bring life to a character in a way that resonates with the audience because they are able to transact a recognizable social role (Gronbeck 237). What is shown and depicted often then reflects real life and real behaviors. This begins to show how important characters are and how realistically they are portrayed in television.

Children and siblings are central to depicting a realistic television family, and that includes showing all aspects of their relationships including sibling conflict. Multiple studies have been done showcasing how television siblings interact, specifically in the forms of sibling aggression, jealousy, and violence. Comstock and Strzyewski found that sibling conflict, especially jealousy, is often shown between television characters and that it occurs most between depicted brothers (267, 277). Additionally, Comstock and Strzyewski found that when conflict is unresolved, tensions rise, which gives opportunities for further conflict and “fosters separation among family members” (267). During a study conducted by Felson, Caucasian siblings were found to be more verbally aggressive than minority siblings on prime-time television (278). Many of these previous studies were qualitative studies where participants were chosen to look at depicted behavior in television shows and give their reaction to it. However, in this study, it is important to look purely at narrative elements chosen and implemented by the creators of *This is Us*, that is, to analyze the various elements and visual codes of a television drama such as dialogue, plot structure, and production techniques that give meaning to the audience. All of these coded items act as message elements to help rhetors create meaning beyond what is in the script or what is being acted out, to transacting characters with social roles. They can also help to reach a level of enactment where the narration reaches a mythic level (Gronbeck 237). While

reaching mythic-level meaning does not happen in all programs or all episodes, coded items play an essential role in meaning making. Therefore, there is a “problem of symbolization, [which] is not so much *what* [televisual] codes are as it is *how* they operate to draw upon and integrate the various levels of meaningfulness present in narration” [emphasis in original] (Gronbeck 239). This shows that depicted message elements in the episode itself are vital in encouraging meaning creation by the television show’s audience.

Sibling relations, whether positive or negative (including conflict), are important to many television shows, especially in *This is Us*, because family is the main topic. To help make the show appear realistic, the show’s creators cover decades of the characters’ lives, and they do this by utilizing flashbacks. A flashback is a scene set in the past which jumps from the present time depicted in the film narrative (Turim 2). Flashbacks have been a visually depictive storytelling tool since the start of the film industry and first appeared in silent films in the 1910s (Bordwell). Flashbacks allow storytellers to give greater insight into a character’s life as well as alter the order of events and linear time progression of an episode. They can recall a character’s memory of past events or recount history of a “shared and recorded past” (Turim 2). Actions, decisions, and emotions depicted in the flashback impact the narrative being told in the show’s present. Flashbacks can either explain a character’s past and reveal certain traits, reveal an event withheld from the narrative for suspense, or lead the narrative in a specific direction (Turim 33). This can make flashbacks an important and unique tool in storytelling since it allows storytellers to manipulate the narrative by using the flashbacks as a way to contrast the depicted present-day narrative or to show a past event that explains why depicted characters act certain ways, therefore unifying the present with the past (Bordwell). When showing the narrative of the flashback, it is often separate from the narrative shown in the depicted present, which expands

the discourse given to the audience. Discourse is “how we are told about what happens” in television narratives (Porter, et al. 25). This discourse of constantly changing timelines keeps viewers on their toes and actively engages them into receiving and paying attention to the narrative.

Flashbacks and the depiction of brothers and narrative structure in *This is Us* have not been studied before. Additionally, limited scholarly articles exist on similar shows such as *Parenthood* and *Modern Family*, which also focus on portraying families and how they interact with one another. In 2013, Coffin did a study looking at equal parenting and gender expectations through a Feminist Theory lens in *Parenthood* and *Modern Family*. In 2017, Bell and Harris studied Black masculinity in *Parenthood*, and in 2013, Holton studied the portrayal of Autism, also in *Parenthood*. Lastly, a study done by Kelly looks at Christian theology in *Modern Family*. While all of these previous studies are relevant, they do not look at specific televisual and rhetorical depiction devices used in creating the story of television characters and their created experiences. Additionally, many articles on television families and siblings address older programs and narrative issues and cannot accurately address the current television depiction trends. This study fills a hole in narrative research by looking at how flashbacks help to portray and give viewer insight into the depicted relationship between two unconventional and interracial brothers. One brother is the son of two white parents, and the other is adopted and black. This creates an unconventional, and often times strained, depicted relationship that deserves thoughtful critical analysis.

Justification for Artifact

This Is Us is set in Pittsburgh in the 1980s, and is about the lives of a family and their three children - two of whom are triplets (the third child died during birth) and an adopted black

child who was also born on the same day. This special series covers the family at all stages of their lives and shows how moments from the siblings' childhood have impacted their adult lives.

NBC, the producer of this series, explains:

This is Us chronicles the Pearson family across the decades: from Jack and Rebecca as young parents in the 1980s to their 37-year-old kids Kevin, Kate and Randall searching for love and fulfillment in the present day. This grounded, life-affirming dramedy reveals how the tiniest events in our lives impact who we become, and how the connections we share with each other can transcend time, distance and even death" ("This is Us").

Each episode, in some variation of years, jumps back-and-forth between the early dating and married years of Jack and Rebecca, to the childhood years of their children Kevin, Kate, and Randall, and to the present-day adult years of the siblings. *This is Us* covers several tough issues such as race, the hardships of raising a family, obesity, acceptance, terminal illness, love, and loss. As a result of covering so many real-world topics, the story line seeks to resonate with viewers who see it as authentic, relatable, and real. Toussaint writes about how the issues shown in *This is Us* are to some extent familiar to everyone watching and that "once a week we can watch real actors play real people who work on real problems in a dignified way." This idea of realism is introduced by Barker, who notes that verisimilitude, or the "quality of *appearing* to be true or real," better explains television's realism [emphasis in original] (43). Television dramas do not show real life, rhetors only try to emulate and represent certain facets of the real world. Seen in Toussaint's review, the creators of the show do this successfully. As mentioned earlier, this verisimilitude happens when actors transact their role and character and assume a social role and character type such a mother- or brother-type. For example, a character of a mother and her depicted actions are "judged by the sociocultural standards for motherliness embedded in

viewers' stocks of knowledge" (Gronbeck 237). This gives viewers the opportunity to use their own life experiences and social understanding to see their own lives reflected in the characters depicted on screen.

This is Us is a heart-warming series that stands out among a sea of network shows. According to TV Series Finale, for the 2016-2017 year, season one of *This is Us* was the number one NBC Scripted Show with a 2.68 18-49 demo ranking and an average of 9.84 million viewers. *This is Us* was followed by *Chicago Fire*, *Chicago PD*, and *The Good Place* ("NBC 2016-17 Season Ratings"). As a result of these high rankings and its popularity, *This Is Us* and its cast members have 61 nominations and have won 26 awards. According to IMDb, these include a Golden Globe, two Emmys, a Screen Actors Guild Award, and a Critics' Choice Award, among others ("Awards"). It was also chosen as a Top Television Program by the American Film Institute in 2016 and 2017, and as the TV Program of the Year in 2017 and 2018 ("AFI Awards"). *This is Us* has been a hit since it aired and ratings only keep rising as it moves into its second season (Chaney). Its successful first season had 18 episodes, and each episode had a running time of 42 minutes ("This is Us").

Research Question

How are interracial brothers depicted through the contrasting and unified narrative created through present day and flashback scenes that focus on Kevin and Randall in *This is Us*?

Rhetorical Criticism Method

Since family is such an important aspect of *This is Us*, the relationship between the two brothers, Kevin and Randall served as my analytic focal point. I analyzed episodes 2 ("The Big Three"), 4 ("The Pool"), 7 ("The Best Washing Machine in the World"), and 15 ("Jack Pearson's Son") from season 1 of *This is Us*. These episodes have a greater focus on Kevin and Randall's

relationship both in the depicted present day and during their childhood years. In order to gain a cohesive understanding of each episode and flashbacks used, I charted the flashbacks and present-day scenes that pertained to the brothers' relationship in each episode. During this charting process, I examined the characters involved, the portée, the amplitude, the initial and key plot action of the flashback, the insertion point and duration of the scene, how the brother's relationship is being depicted, as well as the flashback function. According to Turim, the portée of the analepse, or flashback, is "how long ago the past event occurred," and the amplitude is "the duration of the event within the analepse" (8). Turim also recognizes seven functions of flashbacks, which include: story within a story, trial testimony, didactic reminder to the audience of events already seen, haunting of the past, character narration, character's past explained, and revealing an incident withheld from the exposition of the narrative for the purpose of suspense (33).

After charting each flashback that focused on Kevin and Randall, I organized them according to the show's fabula, or chronological order of events, and detailed how each flashback functions within the rest of the episode. I analyzed whether the flashback creates new meaning, elaborates on an already presented topic, or contradicts what has already been shown. Focusing on the two brothers, I analyzed how the action depicted in the flashbacks of each episode influences their depicted actions in the present day. For example, as seen in Charts 2-C and 2-D, Kevin does *not* protect Randall from bullies in the flashback scene but goes on to admit that he was not a very good brother in the following present-day scene. As the episodes progress and as each flashback is shown, the dynamics of their relationship are slowly revealed by the rhetors, which offers the audience knowledge about the brothers' relationship that grows with each flashback scene. I then continued to analyze how each flashback reveals new information

and how the depicted relationship between Kevin and Randall changes throughout the four chosen episodes.

Flashback Analysis

Flashbacks are used extensively in *This is Us* and act as a way to expand narrative themes throughout a larger timeline. Flashbacks, coupled with present-day scenes, give insight as to how Randall and Kevin's relationship has evolved from the depicted ages of 8 (1989), 15 (1996), and 36 in the present day (2016). Observing how their relationship evolves throughout the various points in their lives offers a greater understanding of why they act the way they do in the present-day scenes. The episodes were analyzed sequentially because, as the episodes progress, the brothers go from fighting and arguing, to slowly opening up to each other, and eventually supporting one another. The episodes chosen and the progression of the scenes followed basic plot structure: conflict, a climax, and, eventually, a resolution. The following analysis shows how the rhetors use of flashbacks and plot, as well as dialogue, developed Randall and Kevin's relationship from an intense and hostile one to an amicable and loving family connection.

In the first episode, "The Big Three," the plot jumps between the present day and 1989. In this episode, four flashback scenes and one present-day scene focus on the brothers' relationship. The episode opens with Kevin and Randall yelling at each other to shut up and Kevin calling Randall "Webster." This is a reference to the television show *Webster*, which aired in 1983, and starred a white family adopting a black boy named Webster (IMDb, "Webster"). This reference gives the scene historical context and explains the dynamics between adoption and race and how people may react. This short interaction sets up their relationship as unfriendly and argumentative and sets the tone for the rest of the episode. In the next flashback, Randall and Kevin are again telling each other to shut up and Kevin is again calling Randall "Webster." The

shot jumps from Rebecca, their mother, telling Kate goodnight to Kevin and Randall fighting on the floor of their shared bedroom. Rebecca is seen running into the room and breaking up the fight.

Rebecca: No, stop. To your beds right now. Now. (boys groan)

Okay, who am I yelling at first?

(Randall and Kevin point to each other. Rebecca sighs.)

Kev, bud, what is the deal? Why are you always so hard on him?

Kevin: Everybody thinks it's weird that we're brothers.

Rebecca: (Shakes her head) You know it doesn't matter what people think. (Kevin sighs)

He is your little brother, Kevin. You have to be there for one another. Do you hear me?

Kevin: (Kevin sighs) Yes.

Rebecca: (Kisses Kevin's forehead) I love you. (Goes to Randall)

Randall: Can you force him to be nice?

Rebecca: I'll see what I can do. Hey. Promise me you'll always be good.

Randall: I'll see what I can do.

This important moment in the development of these characters depicts the first time that Kevin expresses why he dislikes Randall. Kevin is shown as worrying about what other people think of him and his family. Two acts later, this idea is addressed again in the third flashback. Kevin, Kate, and Randall are coming off the school bus when the other kids start laughing and taunting Randall while also calling him "Webster." One of the school boys calls to Kevin and says, "Kev, come on, Kevin, ditch Webster." Kevin and Randall look at each other but Kevin does nothing to stand up for Randall and follows the other boy into the school. These flashbacks show that from the early stages of their depicted childhood the relationship between the brothers was distant.

Series rhetors depict Kevin as struggling to create a solid foundation for their relationship because of outside pressure from friends and people at school. These outside influences affected their relationship from early childhood into their depicted adulthood, where they do not interact very much. At the end of the episode, which takes place in the present day, Kevin is upset and decides to call Randall. During this phone conversation, both Kevin and Randall are depicted as being awkward and unsure of their relationship and how to interact with each other.

Randall: Damn. Well, what're you gonna do?

Kevin: I was kind of hoping you'd tell me.

Randall: Oh, because you care what I think?

Kevin: (Starting to tear up) Because I care what everyone thinks, man. You know that.

(Pause) I was not a very good brother to you, was I?

Randall: No, you weren't. (Pause) But you've still got time.

This conversation is the first time Kevin and Randall are shown talking together in their adult lives. Both are depicted as being cautious of their words, while also trying to mend their rocky relationship. The three flashbacks were used by the rhetors to explain why Kevin cares about other people's opinions and why Randall is doubtful about Kevin asking what he thinks in the present day. The flashbacks show that a person's behaviors from childhood remain a part of their personality into adulthood. This scene invites audience meaning creation at Gronbeck's mythic level of meaning and shows the connectedness of one's behavior over time. Kevin's actions are mirrored throughout the flashbacks and the present-day scene. This creates a unified narrative throughout this episode because Kevin continues to express how influenced he is by other people's opinions of him, his actions, and his family.

The second episode, “The Pool,” focuses on Kevin’s relationship with his parents and the plot jumps between the depicted years of 1989 and 2016. This episode has six important flashback scenes and one present-day scene that advance Kevin and Randall’s relationship. As with the first episode, this episode also opens with a flashback scene where Kevin and Randall are telling each other to shut up. This episode takes place during the summer of 1989, only a few months after the first episode, so Kevin and Randall’s relationship has not changed from how it was depicted in the first episode. Seven minutes into the episode, the rhetors utilize a flashback to reveal the dynamics of Kevin and Randall’s relationship. In this scene, Act 2 scene 1, Rebecca is putting sunscreen on Kevin when he questions why he needs it and says he does not like swimming. This is followed by Rebecca telling him to just sit in the shallow end with Randall, and Kevin saying the simple phrase, “I don’t like Randall either.” This phrase shows that Kevin’s depicted dislike for Randall is not just pressure from other school kids but has become ingrained into his way of thinking and acting. It is not until act 5 scene 2, that the rhetors reveal more information that expand Kevin and Randall’s depicted relationship. Throughout the episode, Kevin has been wanting his parents to watch him play in the pool but they have been preoccupied looking for where Randall ran off to. While their attention was not focused on Kevin, he swam into the deep end trying to get a ball and started to drown. He was able to grab a pool rope divider and pull himself to the edge where he looked around only to discover that no one had been watching him and would have noticed had he actually drowned. He got out of the pool and confronted his parents.

Kevin: I almost drowned!

Rebecca: What?

Kevin: Did you even care?

Rebecca: [interrupting] When?

Kevin: I tried to get to the deep end, but you never watch me. You always watch them.

Jack: Hey, calm down.

Rebecca: Kev, Kev, Kev. Come on . . .

Kevin: Don't touch me.

Jack: Watch yourself, pal.

Kevin: You're so busy making sure that Kate's not eating too much . . . and . . . and

Randall's not too adopted, and meanwhile, where's Kevin? Oh, guess what? He's dead.

This flashback brings up the issue of Kevin not getting enough attention from his parents, as well as revisits the impact of Randall's adoption on their relationship. This scene is the climax for this episode and reveals key issues for Kevin. The rhetors used this flashback to show how important and vital parents are in making children feel wanted and the difficulty of raising three children with separate needs. Series rhetors emphasize that if one child is feeling neglected and left out, these feelings could cause future issues and further strain in their relationships. This scene also shows that the rhetors created Kevin's character as one who likes to be dramatic and over-exaggerate situations, character traits that continue to define him as he grows older and are emphasized in future scenes. The flashbacks of the family at the pool show the history between the two characters and emphasize the division between Kevin and Randall.

The episode ends with a scene set in the present day where Kevin shows up unannounced at Randall's house asking if he could "crash" for a while. Randall is depicted as being shocked and unsure of what to say, which leads to his wife, Beth, agreeing and welcoming Kevin into their home. The rhetors end the episode with Kevin seeking out Randall's help, while also assuming that Randall will help him. The previous flashbacks depict Kevin as someone who

feels separate from his family because he does not have a strong relationship with his brother and because he feels that he does not get enough of his parent's attention. This contrasts with the present-day scene where he willingly goes to Randall's house, knowing that he will have to spend an extended period of time with him. Coupled with the first episode where Kevin calls Randall for advice, the rhetors slowly show that Kevin is trying to bridge the gap between his relationship with Randall and that it is becoming more positive than what is depicted in the flashbacks. This depicted contrast between the flashback and present-day scene shows growth between the characters and invited the audience to be aware of, and sympathetic toward, the negative and hurtful actions they experienced when they were younger.

The third episode, "The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World," is the apex of the four episodes analyzed in this essay and has four flashbacks and five present-day scenes that look at the brother's relationship. The majority of this episode focuses on their relationship and jumps between 1996 and 2016. Like the first two episodes, this episode opens up with a flashback to Kevin and Randall fighting, only now they are 15 years old and in high school. In this scene, Kevin throws a football at Randall while he is doing his homework, which leads to a verbal argument and Rebecca coming in to fix the problem. This scene ends with Kevin leaving his and Randall's room and moving into the basement. This fight sets the tone for the rest of the episode. A big theme that runs throughout this episode is the topic of jealousy, which appears in both present-day and flashback scenes. In Act 1, scenes 3-4, Kevin and Randall are on a run in the present day, which turns into a race to see who would get home first. Once home, Randall tells Beth and that he and Kevin are going to dinner that day, which surprises Beth, and she compares them to Cain and Abel. Randall responds by saying he would be Cain "'cause he's the brother that won." This is the first and only biblical reference in the first season and clearly

shows the extent of the strain in their depicted relationship. The story of Cain and Abel was chosen deliberately by the rhetors and is widely known for deep-rooted jealousy that lead to Cain murdering Abel. While this is an over-exaggerated metaphor, since Kevin and Randall's relationship has not reached the point of murder, it specifically shows how divided Kevin and Randall are and how their relationship has not changed since they were kids. However, this episode also shows that Randall had once wanted to mend their relationship, but Kevin kept pushing him away until Randall stopped reaching out. In Act 3, scenes 2-3, the rhetors flash back to Randall turning to Kate for advice and asking her why Kevin hates him so much. She says, "Kevin doesn't hate you. You guys are just so intense with each other, you know? Try lightening things up a little. Joke around with him more." Randall takes her advice to heart and goes down to the basement and tries to offer Kevin breakfast as a peace offering and makes jokes about his new "digs." Randall is met with hostility and Kevin says, "Randall, can you please just get out of here, man? Look, I came down to get away from you. . . . Are you deaf? I said get out. Get a life." As evident in this flashback, Kevin wants nothing to do with Randall and is physically separating himself from his brother, further showing how tense their relationship has become.

Their relationship tension only escalates further as the episode progresses. In the fifth flashback of the episode, Kevin and Randall are playing against each other at a football game. This scene does not have any dialogue between the two boys and all of their communication is expressed through nonverbal actions such as glares, stares, and puffed chests. During the second play, Kevin is about to throw the ball when he is tackled by Randall. This turns into a physical fight and other teammates and coaches have to pull them away from one another. Until this point, their depicted relationship has only been physical once, as seen in the first episode when Kevin called Randall "Webster." Unlike many of the previous flashbacks, this football scene

directly mirrors the scene immediately following, which is set in the present. In this scene, Randall is catching up to Kevin after he walked out of their dinner. Kevin is upset after learning Randall had never watched “The Manny,” the sitcom Kevin starred in. Randall catches up to him and they confront all of the issues that have built up thus far.

Randall: No. Please, Kevin. Let's hear it, right? What are you harboring? ‘Cause God knows I would really love to hear this.

Kevin: You always got special treatment.

Randall: Because I'm black?

Kevin: No, because you're black and you're adopted.

Randall: Oh, yeah, hit the jackpot with that combination. Couldn't have had it any easier.

Kevin: In our house, you did. With our mother, you did Just admit that you were more important to her, and that she wanted to make sure that you felt special every single minute of every single day so that you wouldn't feel like the odd man out.

Randall: Well, gee, Kevin, I wonder why she was worried about me feeling that way?

Kevin: What the hell does that mean?

. . .

Randall: It means you treated me like a dog. And just like a dog, I kept coming back again and again, just hoping for a scrap from you, like a crumb of affection or kindness or respect.

Kevin: Respect? You wanted my respect? - Yeah. Yeah, okay. No, you wanted to show me up, Randall. Which is what you did every single chance you got.

Randall: No, I did not.

Throughout the first season, the pressure between the two characters had grown until the rhetors chose this moment to emphasize Kevin and Randall's built up emotions. Kevin discusses how he was jealous of Randall for getting all of their mother's attention, when all Randall wanted was Kevin's attention. The rhetors chose to explicitly cover all the topics that have been depicted throughout the season such as jealousy, adoption, and race, while also adding one new element of information – that Randall desperately wanted Kevin's affection. This level of intensity serves as a tipping point for the characters because they opened up about issues stemming from their depicted childhoods. Nevertheless, this scene ends with them on the ground punching and shoving each other until a crowd forms and starts taking pictures. When another actor, played by Seth Meyers as himself, recognizes Kevin as “the Manny” and asks him if he needs to call someone, Kevin responds by saying “Oh. No. This is just my brother.” Having this recognition during their fight is a pivotal moment for Kevin as he finally begins to question his behavior towards Randall and for the first time acknowledges in public that Randall is his brother. This is also the first time that the reasons for their depicted behavior become evident to the audience. This scene and the flashback before it are great examples of the rhetors creating a narrative that flows across time periods. Randall tackling Kevin at the football game explains why they turned to violence in times of high emotion in the present. In this unified narrative, the past explains the present and gives a greater understanding of their relationship. Finally, the episode ends with Kevin asking Randall to “hang-out” and watch television, to which Randall agrees. They sit in silence, under the same blanket, watching “The Manny.” This scene showing a silence filled with contentment contrasts the earlier flashback of Kevin shutting out Randall with a silence stemming from hatred, further showing the slow and steady improvement of their relationship.

The fourth and final episode is called “Jack Pearson’s Son,” and consists of one flashback and four present-day scenes surrounding the two brothers. Like the previous episode, this episode is set in the years 1996 and 2016 and depicts a resolution of the brothers’ relationship. Throughout this episode, Randall is seen as getting more and more stressed and overwhelmed from various aspects of his life such as his work, his father’s terminal illness, and his family life. After focusing on Randall, the episode finally turns to his relationship with Kevin at 38 minutes into the episode. Randall calls Kevin after a taxing day at work to tell him he cannot make it to his play’s opening night performance. Randall acts oddly during the conversation and hangs up, leaving Kevin depicted as looking confused and worried. In the following scene, Kevin shows up backstage and his cast mate asks him if he is ready and Kevin says that he is “thinking about what his dad would do.” The scene cuts to Kevin running through downtown New York, but jumps to a flashback where Kevin notices Randall in his room crying and frustrated over an essay, but does not do anything. The scene jumps back to Kevin running, only now he is in Randall’s office building. He stops outside his office and notices Randall sitting on the floor in the corner crying. Kevin goes in and does not say anything. He sits down next to him, puts his arm around him, and lays Randall’s head on his chest. This caring and comforting act would not be possible without the previous episodes and flashbacks revealing the intricacies of their relationship. The flashback that interrupts the scenes of Kevin running was created to show Kevin’s memory of a time where he neglected to be a good brother when he saw Randall needing someone the most. Turim’s flashback form of memory, or the “personal archives of the past,” (2) is used in this scene to show the correlation between Kevin and Randall’s past and present behavior, in particular as Kevin recalls his failure to act when he was a child. Unlike in previous flashbacks, the rhetors utilized this flashback as a way to show altered behavior.

Kevin's opposing actions create a contrasting narrative, and the rhetors show that Kevin actually cares about Randall and that he has learned from his past actions. This depicted contrast shows how everyone's past shapes who they are as adults and how they decide to act in certain moments. As a result, the audience is able to relate to the characters and the show appears more realistic. These scenes show character development in Kevin, flashbacks used in the form of a memory, and a previously depicted strained relationship now as loving.

Discoveries

Flashbacks are a useful and creative tool for advancing televisual storylines, as well as giving an historical basis for a character's depicted behavior, and they continue to give a unique element to television narratives. The creators of *This is Us* put flashbacks at the forefront of their series and use them to drive character development that adds layers of meaning to their rich and complex story of the Pearson family. Through the use of flashbacks, the rhetors invite the audience to grow with the characters as their entire lives are spread out across 42-minute episodes. Flashbacks help create an unconventional plot structure not limited by a finite timeline. This study showcases how flashbacks give insight into character traits that remained the same or changed as the characters grew up. In addition, I found that flashbacks serve the purpose of building up tension by slowly introducing issues and conflict between the characters until the rhetors reveal how all of the issues come together and influence the way the characters interact in the present day. Flashbacks set the tone of an episode and give context for present-day scenes. They do this by presenting the key issues for the episode and introducing vital relationship dynamics that give the audience a basis of understanding for the rest of the episode. Without the flashbacks, the audience would not be able to completely and holistically understand the characters and their relations with each other. Dialogue and nonverbal actions would not make

sense without the background and buildup of events that the flashbacks provide. This is in line with Turim's previous research on flashbacks. She found that "by suddenly presenting the past, flashbacks can abruptly offer new meaning connected to any person, place, or object. Flashbacks then gain a particularly rich dimension in the coding of the psychology of character" (12). The development of character, including personality, beliefs, and psychology assists in creating narrative verisimilitude. When the show's creators develop characters with believable personalities and behaviors, the audience is able to relate to the characters and are invited to become invested in their depicted growth, achievements, and relationships. Therefore, the rhetors are successful in representing real-world actions and relationships through the visual cues, dialogue, and narrative tools used.

This study focused on dialogue and the relationship between two brothers, but many other narrative and technical elements present in *This is Us* are equally important and should be studied in the future. For example, lighting plays a large role in creating the tone and dynamic of scenes throughout *This is Us*. Future studies may investigate how lighting also helps create meaning when paired with the brothers' relationship and the use of flashbacks. As technology advances, television shows continue to grow more and more complex and narratives grow more and more intricate. Flashbacks have played an important visually depictive storytelling role since the beginning of television and film messaging, and the producers of *This is Us* have created a show that proves the significance of this tool in defining characters and how their relationships have evolved over time.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Episode Citations

“The Big Three.” *This is Us*. NBC, 2016. Hulu.

Original Season: 1016-2017 Place in Season Sequence: 2 of 18 episodes	Director: Ken Olin	Writer: Dan Fogelman
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“The Pool.” *This is Us*. NBC, 2016. Hulu

Original Season: 2016-2017 Place in Season Sequence: 4 of 18 episodes	Director(s): John Requa & Glenn Ficarra	Writer(s): Dan Fogelman & Donald Todd
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“The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World.” *This is Us*. NBC, 2016. Hulu.

Original Season: 2016-2017 Place in Season Sequence: 7 of 18 episodes	Director(s): Silas Howard	Writer(s): K.J. Steinburg
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“Jack Pearson’s Son.” *This is Us*. NBC, 2017. Hulu.

Original Season: 2016-2017 Place in Season Sequence: 15 of 18 episodes	Director(s): Ken Olin	Writer(s): Isaac Aptaker & Elizabeth Berger
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Appendix 2: Characters in Scene

CIS (Characters in Scene)			
Actor Name	Character Name	Character Role	Abbreviation
Milo Ventimiglia	Jack Pearson	Father/Husband	JP
Mandy Moore	Rebecca Pearson	Mother/Wife	ReP
Sterling K. Brown	Randall Pearson	Brother/Son/Father	RaP
Chrissy Metz	Kate Pearson	Sister/Daughter	KaP
Justin Hartley	Kevin Pearson	Brother/Son	KeP
Susan Kelechi Watson	Beth Pearson	Randall's Wife	BP
Eris Baker	Tess Pearson	Randall's Daughter	TP
Faithe Herman	Annie Pearson	Randall's Daughter	AP

*Other characters as listed

Appendix 3: Episode 2 Analysis Charts

Chart 2-A	
Episode: S. 1 E. 2 “The Big Three”	Flashback Number: 1
Act: 1	Scene: 1
Characters Shown: ReP, KeP, KaP, RaP, JP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 1:47
Duration: 1:47	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 0:34	
Key Plot Action: Pearson family comes in for breakfast. KaP disagrees with RP on her breakfast. Some attitude between ReP and JP. JP and the kids do a family chant.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP calls RaP a name – “Webster” – and both tell each other to shut up.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Natural, golden sunlight	

Chart 2-B	
Episode: S. 1 E. 2 “The Big Three”	Flashback Number: 3
Act: 3	Scene: 1-2
Characters Shown: ReP, KaP, KeP, RaP, JP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 1 hour
Duration: 4:42	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 16.55	
Key Plot Action: KaP worries about what she eats – only ate fruit today. KeP and RaP fight before bed. JP gets home late and ReP tells him to stop drinking so that they can be better parents.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP still calling RaP “Webster,” they get into a physical fight and RaP has to break it up. KeP says that people think it’s weird that they are brothers. ReP says they have to be there for one another. RaP says, “can you force him to be nice?” ReP tells him to always be good.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Dark, light coming from bed stand/room lights.	

Chart 2-C	
Episode: S. 1 E. 2 “The Big Three”	Flashback Number: 5
Act: 5	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP, KaP, school kids	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 0:25
Duration: 0:25	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 28:38	
Key Plot Action: KeP and RaP get off the school bus at school. RaP is laughed and taunted at by the other kids. Kids call RaP “Webster.” They tell KeP to “ditch” RaP, which he does.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP does not stick up for RaP.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Outside, natural light	

Chart 2-D	
Episode: S. 1 E. 2 “The Big Three”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 5	Scene: 3
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP, KaP,	
Portée: 0	Amplitude: 2:46
Duration: 2:46	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 29:00	
Key Plot Action: KeP calls RaP. KeP tells RaP that he cannot leave the show and asks for advice. Says he cares about what everybody thinks and that he was not a very good brother. RaP tells him he still has time. RaP starts the family chant. Make light hearted jokes at the end.	
Brother’s Relationship: Phone call ends positively.	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Night, limited light.	

Chart 2-E	
Episode: S. 1 E. 2 “The Big Three”	Flashback Number: 6
Act: 6	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: ReP, JP, KeP, RaP, KaP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 3:35
Duration: 3:35	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point: 38:04	
Key Plot Action: JP slept outside their door. He decides to stop drinking and be a better husband and father. Gives ReP a moon necklace. KaP, KeP, and RaP pile on top of JP and ReP.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP and Rap are smiling	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Inside, morning, natural sunny glow from window	

Appendix 4: Episode 4 Analysis Chart

Chart 4-A	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 “The Pool”	Flashback Number: 1
Act: 1	Scene: 1
Characters Shown: ReP, KeP, KaP, RaP, JP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 2:06
Duration: 2:06	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 0:40	
Key Plot Action: KeP and RaP fight over a Rubik’s Cube. The AC is broken so the family decides to go to the pool.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP and RaP fight over a toy. KeP wanted ReP to yell at RaP.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Cool natural lighting from windows	

Chart 4-B	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 "The Pool"	Flashback Number: 2
Act: 1	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: JP, ReP, RaP, KeP, KaP.	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 0:22
Duration: 0:22	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 2:48	
Key Plot Action: The family is at the pool. JP tracks down free chairs.	
Brother's Relationship: Seems good. RaP and KeP race to get a chair	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Bright sun, outside	

Chart 4-C	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 “The Pool”	Flashback Number: 3
Act: 2	Scene: 1
Characters Shown: ReP, KaP, KeP, RaP, JP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 1:32
Duration: 1:32	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 7:29	
Key Plot Action: Family at pool. ReP puts sunscreen on everyone. Kids run off. ReP is worried about KaP’s weight and people’s judgement. Also worried about KeP’s attitude towards RaP – that KeP is jealous of RaP	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP says he “doesn’t like Randall.”	
Flashback Function: Character’s past explained	
Lighting: Bright sun, outside	

Chart 4-D	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 “The Pool”	Flashback Number: 4
Act: 3	Scene: 1
Characters Shown: ReP, JP, RaP, KeP, KaP, KaP’s friends	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 1:09
Duration: 1:09	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 14:55	
Key Plot Action: ReP and JP look for the kids. KeP show off his handstand. RaP runs off and ReP gets mad at KeP for not watching RaP. KaP gets a note from her friends.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP and RaP play in the pool until RaP runs off.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Bright sun, outside	

Chart 4-E	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 "The Pool"	Flashback Number: 6
Act: 4	Scene: 4
Characters Shown: KeP, JP, ReP, RaP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 1:42
Duration: 1:42	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 23:33	
Key Plot Action: KeP calls for his JP to watch him while in the pool. ReP is mad at the lady for telling her how to raise her kid. They have their backs turned to Kep and he goes into the deep end after a ball and almost drowns.	
Brother's Relationship: parents are focused on RaP and do not notice KeP	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Bright sun, outside	

Chart 4-F	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 "The Pool"	Flashback Number: 7
Act: 5	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: ReP, JP, KeP, RaP, KaP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 1:15
Duration: 1:15	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point: 25:40	
Key Plot Action: ReP finds not given to KaP. She and JP get upset of ReP stops JP from going to talk with the girls. KeP says he almost drowned and does not get enough attention. JP apologizes.	
Brother's Relationship: KeP jealous that his parents are always occupied with making sure KaP does not eat too much and that RaP does not feel "too adopted." Needs more attention from parents	
Flashback Function: Revealing an incident withheld for suspense, character's past explained	
Lighting: Bright sun, outside	

Chart 4-G	
Episode: S. 1 E. 4 "The Pool"	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 6	Scene: 5
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP, BP, AP, TP, WH	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 1:27
Duration: 1:27	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point: 40:24	
Key Plot Action: KeP shows up at RaP's house and asks to crash there. RaP is hesitant to let him stay. KeP is introduced to WH	
Brother's Relationship: Not very close	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Night, light from lamps.	

Appendix 5: Episode 7 Analysis Chart

Chart 7-A	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: 1
Act: 1	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: ReP, KeP, RaP	
Portée: 20 years ago	Amplitude: 2:06
Duration: 2:06	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1996	
Insertion Point (approx.): 1:42	
Key Plot Action: 2am and RaP is working on homework with his bed side lamp. KeP throws a football at him ruining his work. They argue and are interrupted by ReP. KeP moves into the basement. RaP says he could work in the kitchen but KeP still leaves.	
Brother’s Relationship: hostile, KeP is jealous RaP is also on the football team. RaP does not want to fight and tries to find a remedy but KeP does not stay	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Night. Single light next to RaP’s bed	

Chart 7-B	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 1	Scene: 3-4
Characters Shown: RaP, KeP, BP, TP, AP	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 2:13
Duration: 2:13	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 3:14	
Key Plot Action: KeP is on a run and sees RaP. They start to race home. At home, they compare running distances – KeP ran 6 miles, RaP ran 8 miles. RaP tells BP he and KeP are going to dinner together and BP does not believe him. AP and TP get ready for school.	
Brother’s Relationship: competitive. BP compares them to Cain and Able; RaP says he would be Cain because “he’s the brother that won.”	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Bright sun, outside; inside house, natural light from windows	

Chart 7-C	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: 4
Act: 3	Scene: 2-3
Characters Shown: KaP, KeP, RaP	
Portée: 20 years ago	Amplitude: 1:16
Duration: 1:16	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1996	
Insertion Point (approx.): 18:27	
Key Plot Action: RaP goes to KaP to ask why KeP hates him so much. KaP says they are too intense with each other and to lighten up and joke around. RaP brings KeP breakfast in the basement. He tries to make jokes and kicks him out. KeP says “get a life.”	
Brother’s Relationship: RaP is sad to have his own room, tries to reach out to KeP and bring him breakfast. KeP only wants to get away from him. KaP notices their strained relationship	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: KaP’s room: natural warm light from window. Basement: cold light from single small window, dark	

Chart 7-D	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: 5
Act: 4	Scene: 1
Characters Shown: ReP, JP, RaP, KeP, KaP,	
Portée: 20 years ago	Amplitude: 2:31
Duration: 2:31	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1996	
Insertion Point (approx.): 24:34	
Key Plot Action: ReP and JP are at the football game. ReP begins to tell JP how rehearsal was but it interrupted by someone in the stands who spoke to JP. KeP and RaP are playing against each other. RaP tackles KeP and they start to fight and throw each other around. JP, ReP, and KaP react from the sideline. JP is confused as to why they are fighting.	
Brother’s Relationship: physically aggressive towards each other. During this scene, they say no words to each other.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story, character’s past explained	
Lighting: Night, stadium lights	

Chart 7-E	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 4	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: RaP, KeP	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 2:47
Duration: 2:47	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 27:12	
Key Plot Action: RaP catches up to KeP. KeP does not know what RaP does for a living. KeP is mad RaP did not watch the show. KeP sees an ad of his replacement on The Manny and says, “replaced by another black man.” KeP says RaP always got special treatment and was more important to their mother (b/c he is “black and adopted”). RaP blames KeP for him getting more attention; compares himself to a dog always coming back [to KeP] for kindness and respect. KeP says he was always “showing me up.” They start pushing each other and a crowd forms. They run off.	
Brother’s Relationship: hostile. Subjects come to light on how they both feel. KeP wanted to be the “star” and wanted his family’s attention but felt it all went to RaP – jealous. All RaP wanted was KeP’s attention.	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Night, dark, street lights	

Chart 7-F	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: 6
Act: 5	Scene: 3
Characters Shown: KeP, JP, ReP, RaP, KaP	
Portée: 28 years ago	Amplitude: 0:37
Duration: 0:37	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1989	
Insertion Point (approx.): 33:28	
Key Plot Action: Family walks back to the car after the football game. JP tells them to “get their asses in the car.” Everyone is silent	
Brother’s Relationship: Silent. Strained.	
Flashback Function: Story within a story	
Lighting: Dark. Street light	

Chart 7-G	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 5	Scene: 4
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 1:30
Duration: 1:30	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 34:14	
Key Plot Action: RaP and KeP drive home in silence. RaP says ReP did favor him because “the one person he wanted it from the mo... [most did not].” Says (scene 4) it was the first time KeP has called him his brother. Continue to sit in silence	
Brother’s Relationship: Strained. First time talking about their relationship	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Dark. Light from the outside of the house.	

Chart 7-H	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 6	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 1:07
Duration: 1:07	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point: 36:54	
Key Plot Action: KeP and RaP in basement. BP moved all KeP’s things to the basement. KeP asks RaP if he wants to hang out and watch tv. RaP agrees.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP makes an effort to spend time with RaP	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Room lights	

Chart 7-I	
Episode: S. 1 E. 7 “The Best Washing Machine in the Whole World”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 6	Scene: 4
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 0:15
Duration: 0:15	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point: 38:19	
Key Plot Action: KeP and RaP watch The Manny together and sit next to each other.	
Brother’s Relationship: Share a blanket. Starting to open up with each other.	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Room lights	

Appendix 6: Episode 15 Analysis Chart

Chart 15-A	
Episode: S. 1 E. 15 “Jack Pearson’s Son”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 2	Scene: 6
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP, RaP’s assistant, RaP’s boss	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 1:50
Duration: 1:50	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 16:48	
Key Plot Action: RaP shows up late to work, learns that his meeting was moved to the afternoon. KeP shows up and surprises RaP, talks about his play. RaP talk’s to WH’s nurse – WH fired her. RaP yells, KeP asks if he’s ok.	
Brother’s Relationship: RaP is visibly stressed, forgetting where things are. KeP is not aware of RaP’s busy day and just shows up at his work, reminds him where he put things.	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Bright, office lights.	

Chart 15-B	
Episode: S. 1 E. 15 “Jack Pearson’s Son”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 6	Scene: 2
Characters Shown: RaP, KeP, play manager	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 1:18
Duration: 1:18	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 37:59	
Key Plot Action: 5 mins until play starts. KeP gets a call from Rap. RaP tells him he cannot make it to the play, RaP saying weird things that are not following the conversation. Call ends and KeP looks confused	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP is sad RaP cannot make it, looks confused about the phone call	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Semi dark, dressing room and office desk lamp.	

Chart 15-C	
Episode: S. 1 E. 15 “Jack Pearson’s Son”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 6	Scene: 4-5
Characters Shown: KeP, RaP, Sloan	
Portée: 20 years ago	Amplitude: 1:02
Duration: 1:02	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 39:33	
Key Plot Action: KeP and Sloan backstage. KeP said he is “thinking about what his dad would do.” Lights go down and Sloan walks onstage. Starts talking but KeP did not go on behind her. KeP runs down the street.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP worried about RaP	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: Stage lights; street lights	

Chart 15-D	
Episode: S. 1 E. 15 “Jack Pearson’s Son”	Flashback Number: 7
Act: 6	Scene: 6
Characters Shown: RaP, KeP,	
Portée: 20 years ago	Amplitude: 0:25
Duration: 0:25	Type: Analepse
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 1996	
Insertion Point (approx.): 40:36	
Key Plot Action: KeP goes upstairs to take a shower and sees RaP crying in his room while trying to work on his paper. KeP ignores it and goes into the bathroom.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP does not try to help RaP	
Flashback Function: Character’s past explained, haunting of the past	
Lighting: Hallway lights and light from the computer.	

Chart 15-E	
Episode: S. 1 E. 15 “Jack Pearson’s Son”	Flashback Number: N/A
Act: 6	Scene: 7
Characters Shown: RaP, KeP	
Portée: 0. Present day	Amplitude: 2:47
Duration: 2:47	Type: N/A
Overall Narrative Time Setting: 2016	
Insertion Point (approx.): 41:00	
Key Plot Action: KeP runs in RaP’s office building and sees RaP crying and sitting on his office floor. KeP goes in and lays RaP’s head on his chest. They do not speak, just sit there.	
Brother’s Relationship: KeP knows something is wrong with RaP and goes to comfort him.	
Flashback Function: N/A	
Lighting: office lights	